

Indians in the United States

This article, describing the annual meeting of the Mohonk Convention on the Indian question, was published in La Nación, Buenos Aires, December 4, 1885.

Lake Mohonk is a lovely place in New York State. The forests of the adjacent Adirondacks beckon to grandeur, unsystematically cutting down crude speculators; with forests as with politics, it is unlawful to cut down unless one plants new trees. The lake invites serenity, and the nearby river quietly enriches the land and flows onward to the sea. Rivers go to the sea, men to the future. When the leaves turned yellow and red this autumn, the friends of the Indians foregathered in that picturesque retreat to calmly discuss some way of attracting them to a peaceful and intelligent life in which they could rise above their present condition of rights mocked, faith betrayed, character corrupted, and frequent, justified revolts. In that conference of benevolent men and women there was a notable absence of the spirit of theory which deforms and makes sterile, or at least retards, the well-meaning efforts of so many reformers—efforts which generally alienate them, because of the repulsion which a lack of empathy and harmony inspires in a healthy mind, from the solicitous support of those modest souls who otherwise would be efficient aids in the reformation process. Genius, which explodes and dazzles, need not be divested of the good sense that makes its life on earth so productive. Senators, attorneys and supervisors shared their generous task there with enthusiastic journalists and Protestant ministers. In the United States a woman opened men's hearts to compassion for the Negroes, and nobody did more to set them free than she. Harriet Beecher Stowe was her name, a woman passionately devoted to justice and therefore not afraid to sully her reputation, with tremendous revelations befitting a Byron,

by the prolific success of her *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—a tear that has something to say!

It was also a woman who, with much good sense and sympathy, has worked year after year to alleviate the plight of the Indians. The recently deceased Helen Hunt Jackson, strong-minded and with a loving heart, wrote a letter of thanks to President Cleveland for his determination to recognize the Indian's right to manhood and justice. And at the Lake Mohonk Convention there were people with an apostolic sense of oratory, subsidized by the state. But the inflexible statistics, the exact accounts, the inexorable ciphers did not belong to the supervisors or attorneys or senators, but to a woman named Alice Fletcher, a lively speaker, sure in her reasoning and skilled in debate.

So the Lake Mohonk Convention was not composed of discouraged philanthropists who look at Indians only because they are Indians—seraphic creatures, so to speak—and it was not composed of those butterfly politicians who alight only upon the surface of things, and pass judgment on the basis of mere appearances and results, blind to the fact that the one way to right wrongs is to eradicate their causes.

This was a meeting of men and women of action. One of them, and surely among the most impassioned, “shuddered on recalling the sad scenes on the Indian reservations where they would divide the year's food rations, clothing, and money like wild animals fighting over raw meat.” Anyone who has seen these signs of degradation, since he is human, must have experienced some shame and a desire to lift those unfortunate creatures out of their misery. For it is he who is responsible for all the wrongs he knows about but does nothing to correct. It is a criminal laziness, a passive guilt that is merely a matter of degree in the scale of crime; apostleship is a constant, daily duty. Another person at the convention has seen the Indians huddled in a circle, gambling their year's salary, betting nine out of every 10 dollars, like Chinese workers in the cigar factory of a Spanish prison, the moment they receive on a Saturday afternoon the overtime pay that they have to hand over to the establishment. The convention knows that they are not fond of working, because a bad system of government has accustomed them to being detestably apathetic. The convention is well aware that, since the government gives them a

yearly stipend, and food and clothing, they will resist any reform that tends to improve their character by compelling them to earn their living from their own efforts; that, deprived of the social aspirations and civil pleasures of white people, they will view with indifference the public school system available to them as not proceeding from the tribe's savage existence, or seeming to be necessary to it. The convention knows this. But it also knows that the Indian is not like that by nature; he has been conditioned to it by the system of vilification and easy living imposed upon him for the last hundred years.

Where the Indian has been able to defend himself more successfully and stay as he was, it can be seen that he is by race strong-minded and strong-willed, courageous, hospitable and worthy. Even fierce, like any man or any people close to Nature. Those same noble conditions of personal pride and attachment to territory make him spring around like a wild animal when he is despoiled of his age-old grain fields, when his sacred trees are felled, when the hot winds from his burning homes scorch the manes of his fleeing horses. The one who is burned, burns; the one who is hunted, gives chase; the one who is despoiled of property, despoils in turn. And the one who is exterminated, exterminates.

Thus reduced to a poor nation of 300,000 scattered savages tirelessly fighting a nation of 50 million, the Indian does not enter the cities of his conquerors, does not sit in their schools, is not taught by their industries, is not recognized as a human soul. By means of onerous treaties he is obliged to give up his land. He is taken away from his birthplace, which is like robbing a tree of its roots, and so loses the greatest objective in life. On the pretext of farming, he is forced to buy animals to work the land he does not own. On the pretext of schooling, he is compelled to learn in a strange language, the hated language of his masters, out of textbooks that teach him vague notions of a literature and science whose utility is never explained and whose application he never sees. He is imprisoned in a small space where he moves back and forth among his intimidated companions, his entire horizon filled with the traders who sell him glittering junk and guns and liquor in exchange for the money which, because of the treaties, the government distributes among the reservations every year. Even if he should be possessed by

a desire to see the world, he cannot leave that human cattle ranch. He has no land of his own to till, and no incentive to cultivate it carefully so that he may honorably leave it to his children. Nor does he have to in many of the tribes, because the government, by means of a degrading system of protection that began a century ago, gives him a communal place of land for his livelihood, and furnishes him with food, clothes, medicines, schools, with whatever is a man's natural objective when he works for a wage. If he has no property to improve or trip to take or material needs to satisfy, he spends this money on colored trinkets that cater to his rudimentary artistic taste, or on liquor and gambling that excite and further the brutal pleasures to which he is condemned. With this vile system that snuffs out his personality, the Indian is dead. Man grows by exercising his selfhood, just as a wheel gains velocity as it rolls along. And like the wheel, when a man does not work, he rusts and decays. A sense of disheartened ferocity never entirely extinguished in the enslaved races, the memory of lost homes, the council of old men who have seen freer times in their native forests, the presence of themselves imprisoned, vilified and idle—all these things burst forth in periodic waves each time the harshness or greed of the government agents is closefisted in supplying the Indians with the benefits stipulated in the treaties. And since by virtue of these treaties, and by them alone, a man is robbed of whatever nobility he has, and is permitted only his bestial qualities, it is only natural that what predominates in these revolts, disfiguring the justice producing them, is the beast developed by the system.

All enslaved peoples respond in like manner, not the Indians alone. That is why revolutions following long periods of tyranny are so cruel. What white man in his right mind fails to understand that he cannot throw in the Indian's face a being such as the white man has made of him? "He is graceful and handsome," said the venerable Erastus Brooks at the convention. "His speech is loving and meaningful. We have in American history tens, hundreds of examples to show that the Indian, under the same conditions as the white man, is as mentally, morally and physically capable as he." But we have turned him into a vagabond, a tavern post, a professional beggar. We do not give him work for himself, work that gladdens and uplifts; at best we force him to earn, with work affording him no

direct profit, the cost of the rations and medicines we promise him in exchange for his land, and this in violation of the treaties. We accustom him not to depend upon himself; we habituate him to a life of indolence with only the needs and pleasures of a primitive, naked being. We deprive him of the means of obtaining his necessities through his own efforts, and with hat in hand and bowed head he is obliged to ask the government agent for everything: bread, quinine, clothes for his wife and child. The white men he knows are the tavern keeper who corrupts him, the peddler who cheats him, the distributor of rations who finds a way of withholding a part of them, the unqualified teacher who drills him in a language of which he can speak but a few words, unwillingly and without meaning, and the agent who laughs and shouts at him and bids him be off when he appeals to him for justice. Without work or property or hope, deprived of his native land and with no family pleasures other than the purely physical, what can be expected of these reservation Indians but grim, lazy and sensual men born of parents who saw their own parents crouched in circles on the ground, both pipe and soul snuffed out, weeping for their lost nation in the shade of the great tree that had witnessed their marriages, their pleas for justice, their councils and their rejoicing for a century? A slave is very sad to see, but sadder still is the son of a slave. Even their color is the reflection of mud! Great hotbeds of men are these Indian reservations. Pulling these Indians up by the roots would have been better than vilifying them.

The first treaty was in 1783, and in it the United States government reserved the right to administer the tribes and regulate their trade. And now the 300,000 Indians, subdued after a war in which theirs was not the greatest cruelty, are divided among 50 reservations whose only law is the presidential will, and another 69 known as treaty reservations because of an agreement between the tribes and the government. Thirty-nine of these have treaties stipulating the division of reservation lands into individual properties, an ennobling measure that has scarcely been attempted with 12 of the tribes. "The Indians are given the food that Congress orders for them," said Alice Fletcher, "and because this passes through many hands, there remains in each pair of them some part of it. But the allotment for schools is not distributed, because the

employees can obtain from it the paltry teacher's salary, which is then passed along to their wives or daughters for augmenting household supplies. Thus, out of the \$2 million that must have been spent from the years 1871 to 1881, including the obligations of all the agreements, only \$200,000 have been spent on schools." Many of the tribes have been offered even more than the private property which they are denied, and the schools which have not been established for them: they have been offered citizenship.

All this was heard without contradiction; on the contrary, the Deputy Inspector of Indian Schools, the authors of the House and Senate reservation reform plans, and the members of the Indian Council supported and corroborated it. High government officials supported and corroborated it, too, and applauded the inspired defense of the Indian's character delivered by that fine man, Erastus Brooks. "There is not one of their vices for which we are not responsible! There is no Indian brutality that is not our fault! The agents interested in keeping the Indian brutalized under their control are lying!"

The government defiles the Indian with its system of treaties that condemn him to vice and inertia. And the government agent's greed keeps the government under a false concept of the Indian, or hides the causes of his corruption and rebellions in order to continue whittling away to his heart's content at the funds Congress sets aside for the Indian's maintenance.

Let the governor keep a wary eye on those rapacious employees!

Give President Cleveland high praise; with neither fanatical vanity nor prudery he has made efforts to investigate the Indians' sufferings, and instead of throwing in their faces the ignominy in which they are kept, Cleveland decided to shoulder the blame himself, and raise them by means of a just government to the status of men. This president wants no drunken insects; he wants human beings. "They are drunkards and thieves because we have made them so; therefore we must beg their pardon for having made them drunkards and thieves, and instead of exploiting them and disowning them, let us give them work on *their* lands and encourage them in a desire to live, for they are good people in spite of our having given them the right not to be."

Without a dissenting vote, then, in the shade of the Adirondacks,

which beckon greatness, the convention recommended those practical reforms of simple justice that can change a grievous crowd of oppressed and restless men and women into a useful and picturesque element of American civilization.

Since they have already been robbed of their rights as freed peoples, for reasons of state, let us not rob the Indians of their rights as men. Since the despoiling of their lands, even when rational and necessary, continues to be a violent act resented by every civilized nation with hatred and with secular wars, it must not be aggravated by further repression and inhuman trading. The unfair and corrupting reservation system must be quickly abolished, and we must gradually make national lands available to the Indians, fusing them with the white population so they may promptly own state lands, enjoying the rights and sharing the responsibilities of the rest of the citizenry. The payment of yearly stipends must be abolished, for this encourages begging and vagrancy, and accustoms the Indians to neglect making use of their own resources. We must train the Indians in accord with their needs and potentialities, and they must be convinced—and when necessary compelled—to learn and to work, even if because of the present life of laziness in learning they may resist. The Indians will have to return to their unblemished souls and rise to citizenship.

To thus convert them into useful men and women, and change the regions which today are no more than extremely costly prisons into a peaceful and prosperous country, says the convention, the entire stupid, present-day teaching system will have to be changed. We must substitute the working of common lands, which neither stimulates nor permits the worker to see any profit, for the distributing of land into plots of ground for every family, inalienable for 25 years, in relation to the kind of terrain and the size of each house. The government should pay a good price for the lands not apportioned, and since these monies are to go right back into its own pocket, because the government is the guardian of the Indians who sell them, the government should retain the funds received from these lands for the industrial education and betterment of the Indians, and open the purchased lands to colonization. Let the tribes themselves revoke those treaties responsible for their wretched condition. Admit to citizenship all tribes which accept individual

distribution of their lands, and all Indians who abandon the tribes that refuse to accept them, to comply with the uses of civilization. Stop taking the Indians away from the land of their forefathers and herding them into crowded centers under the self-seeking vigilance of offensive and avaricious government employees "Spread schools," said the Deputy Inspector of Indian Schools at last, but they must be useful and living schools, for every effort to disseminate instruction is futile if it does not apply to the needs, nature and future of the one receiving it. Engage no halfhearted teachers who know nothing of what they teach, and are appointed only to augment the family pittance of some employee, or to please the political bigwigs. Competent teachers will be hired and will compel the Indians to envy their children for the schooling they receive, even if the parents have to curtail their household rations for as long as the ominous rationing system persists. No textbook education, which is merely a storehouse of words weighing heavily upon the head to then tell the hands how to work well. Indians should be taught the nature of the fields they are to cultivate, and the nature of their true selves and the village in which they live; in this way they will understand and admire. Teach them something about practical politics so they may reach a suitable state of mutual respect.

Let them know how the country is run, and what are their human rights to possess it and think about it, and how they may exercise those rights. The school should instruct them in making their life a satisfying one: a country school for country people.

No details or fancy theories; only how to raise animals and plant fields, all the tasks that make them useful and self-possessed members of a community of workers. We should not send the Indians or country people teachers of literature alone. Living literature is the teacher. Let us send them teachers of crafts and agriculture.

That convention held by the friends of the Indians went well and ended well, there by the quiet waters of Lake Mohonk where the mountains are close at hand and where the beautiful square fields, cultivated with scrupulous care, look like colossal green flowers opening to the eyes of men worthy of contemplating them.

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